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Opening the Black Boxes of Consumer Misbehaviors: Insights from Studying Online Trolling

Maja Golf-Papez, University of Canterbury, New Zealand
Ekant Veer, University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Maja Golf-Papez, Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship, University of Canterbury, 20 Kirkwood Ave, Christchurch 8041, New Zealand

T: +64 21 031 2890

E: maja.golfpapez@canterbury.ac.nz

Dr Ekant Veer, Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship, University of Canterbury, 20 Kirkwood Ave, Christchurch 8041, New Zealand

T: +64 3 364 2987

E: ekant.veer@canterbury.ac.nz

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

During the past decade, researchers and practitioners have shown an increased interest in how people misbehave in their role as consumers (Daunt and Greer 2015). Several studies have explored how some consumers act “in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firms, its employees, and other customers” (Lovelock and Wirtz 2016, 524). Most of these studies have taken a dispositional perspective, explaining consumer misbehaviors by referring to the characteristics and predispositions of misbehaving consumers (Daunt and Greer 2015). At the same time, perpetrators of consumer misbehaviors have been in the foreground of existing misbehaviors-management practices. This paper offers and advocates an alternative approach to understanding and managing consumer misbehaviors. Using actor-network-theory (ANT), we suggest that consumer misbehaviors cannot be attributed only to perpetrators but should rather be seen as effects of networks of all kinds of actors (Latour 2005).

To better understand the assemblages that allow and perpetuate consumer misbehavior, we studied online trolling behaviors. Trolling involves deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous attempts to provoke reactions from other online users. In practice, trolling includes anything from offensively replying to customers under fake customer service accounts or posting misleading and damaging product tutorials to communicating with other online users in humorous but also aggressive ways. These behaviors closely correspond to the behaviors of so-called problem customers (Bitner, Booms, and Mohr 1994) and jaycustomers (Lovelock and Wirtz 2016). Their pervasiveness, their potential impacts on marketers, businesses, brands, and other consumers, and the fact that they are under-researched phenomena (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014) make trolling behaviors a relevant and insightful research context for investigating consumer misbehaviors.

In our study, we examined (1) what human and non-human entities are assembled in the performance of trolling and (2) what roles these entities play in the making of this form of online misbehavior. To do so, we adopted a case-study approach, investigating five different instances of trolling: playful trolling, shock trolling, online pranking of other consumers and businesses, fake customer-service trolling, and “good old-fashioned” trolling. The research data were drawn from 250 hours of nonparticipant observation of actors and their practices, seven in-depth interviews with trolls, more than 50 instances of instant messaging with trolls, bystanders, community managers, and targets, and a review of trolling-related documents. The analysis included identifying the actors and recording their relations and interactions. We performed within and cross-case analysis of the five actor-networks and engaged in open and axial coding to sort and categorize the identified actors.

Our findings reveal that online trolling is performatively constituted by a collection of human, nonhuman, and hybrid entities more or less interacting in concert with each other. These entities can be thematically categorized into *troll(s)* (i.e., the performer(s) of trolling), *target(s)* (i.e., persons or objects toward which trolling is directed), *medium* (i.e., an intervening channel through which trolling is conveyed), *audience* (i.e., the spectators of trolling), *other trolls* (i.e., other people engaging in trolling), *trolling artifacts* (i.e., materialized byproducts of trolling), *regulators* (i.e., actors engaged in detecting inappropriate behavior and maintaining order online), and *revenue streams* (i.e., financial and nonfinancial rewards associated with trolling).

Different (categories of) actors play different roles in the performance of trolling. An assemblage of three interacting actors—(1) *troll(s)*, (2) *target(s)*, and (3) a *medium*—has to be enacted for trolling to emerge. Other actors play a role in stabilizing the network and sustaining trolling even when trolls, targets, and a medium are not participating fully. For example, *trolling artifacts* such as post-produced videos of live-stream trolling and screenshots of textual trolling are distributed through the network for months after a trolling event has occurred. While *audience* members play an active role in coproducing and sharing these artifacts, this is only one of the ways in which they encourage trolling. Two more are asking trolls for advice about how to go about trolling or demanding new trolling content from them. *Other trolls* fuel trolling, for example, by pretending to be targets, usually with the intention of attracting more people to their social media sites. With similar intentions, businesses and other actors from the category *revenue streams* approach trolls with requests for trolling, offering financial or nonfinancial types of compensation. Lastly, the enforcement actions of actors in the category *regulators* (e.g., use of downvote, delete, and ban buttons, or an online moderator giving personal warnings) sustain trolling by indicating to the trolls that their actions are getting the desired effect. For trolls, even the most severe penalties seem to be perceived as *modus operandi* if not a badge of honor.

Our study provides the theoretical and managerial implications. First, by studying an online form of consumer misbehavior, we contribute to a more rounded understanding of consumer misbehaviors, which have been up to now predominantly studied in traditional, offline retail settings. Second, by drawing on actor-network-theory we extend the current research on consumer misbehaviors by presenting an alternative, more holistic view of the problem of misbehaviors. We also contribute to research on ANT by revealing that, in the case of trolling, the lack of compliance among the actors may stabilize and energize the network rather than lead to its destabilization and failure (Callon 1984). Finally, our empirical findings, by illuminating the influence that ‘invisible’ actors such as audience and regulators have over the practices of misbehaving consumers, offer new possibilities for management of these misbehaviors. As a way forward in tackling consumer misbehaviors, in particular trolling, we suggest that marketing practitioners and scholars focus on developing control mechanisms that will eliminate or minimize the effects associated with the (problematic) interactions between the actors. If we keep concentrating only on attacking the misbehaving consumers, then we are most likely just displacing the consumer misbehavior to other times and places.

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